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AUTHOR Kuhlman, Wilma
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ABSTRACT

A study investigaged: (1) in what ways sixth-grade students appropriated language and/or themes from multicultural poetry into their own poetry writing and (2) when students appropriated language and/or themes, what factors influenced their choices. Subjects were 5 students within a class of 22, chosen for case studies because of their unique involvement in the classroom community, resistance to distraction, fluency in writing, and diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Data were collected during 6 weeks of language arts study of poetry and poetry writing in which a multicultural text of 55 poems was used. The data were derived from student-authored poetry, selected published poetry, observation, in-depth student interviews, and audiotape recordings of ad hoc peer conference groups. Case analyses were supplemented with data from all 22 class members. It was found that the students did appropriate themes, phrases, and words from the multicultural poetry used and incorporate them into their own poetry, most cross-culturally. Patterns of appropriation indicate that students responded to poems holding some type of personal attraction or meaning. Examples are offered. Implications for multicultural education are also discussed. Contains 14 references. (MSE)

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Influences of multicultural poetry genre study on sixth-grade students' language appropriation

Paper presented at 1996 AERA Conference: New York

Wilma Kuhlman, University of NE at Omaha

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Objectives

The purpose of this research project was to examine the language appropriation of sixth graders while they were involved in a poetry-genre study with multicultural poetry as the literature selected for reading, discussion, and models of good poetry. The following two research questions guided the inquiry:

(1) In what ways do sixth-grade students appropriate language and/or themes from multicultural poetry into their own poetry writing?

(2) When students appropriate language and/or themes from multicultural poetry, what seems to influence their choices?

Theoretical Framework

Language theories proposed by Mikhail Bakhtin were utilized to examine students' written works for patterns of language appropriation. Bakhtin (1981, 1986) emphasized that speech generation (both oral and written) is a functional process by which people not only use and appropriate the words and expressions of others, but also interpret and represent those words and expressions for their own purposes and functions. Bakhtin emphasized the *both/and* nature of language. For example, Himley (1991) suggested that children's stories must be studied as "social and psychological, personal and cultural, unique and normative, public and private, expressive and constitutive" (p.3-4). She called children's texts "shared territory" of individual and social language. Bakhtin (1986) wrote:

> ..the unique speech experience of each individual is shaped and developed in continuous and constant interaction with others' individual utterances. This experience can be characterized to some degree as the process of *assimilation* --more or less creative--of others' words (and not the words of a language). Our speech, that is, all our utterances (including creative works), is filled with others' words, varying degrees of otherness or varying degrees of "our-own-ness," varying degrees of awareness and detachment. These words of others carry with them their own expressions, their own evaluative tone, which we assimilate, rework, and re-accentuate. (p. 89; emphasis in original)

People transform others' utterances into their own language and use it within a social context for their own purposes. Bakhtin (1986) called the process of experiencing and transforming language from one's social world *appropriation*. Appropriation is more than imitation or repetition of others' words. Appropriation involves assimilation of some of the words, intonations, and expressiveness from the

social world and then reorganizing and applying those expressions to one's own discourse for one's own purposes. When the user applies those expressions, the purpose and circumstance is likely different from the one first experienced. Bakhtin (1981) says:

> Language for the individual consciousness, lies on the borderline between oneself and the other. The word in language is half someone else's. It becomes "one's own" only when the speaker populates it with his own intention, his own accent, when he appropriates the word, adapting it to his own semantic and expressive intention. (p. 293)

Bakhtin (1981) described language appropriation as active, in that speakers/writers appropriate utterances from social settings to communicate original messages. Recent research has revealed that stories written by children included appropriation of words and meanings identified from adult-authored books, peers, families and other sources (Lensmire and Beals, 1994; Kamberelis and McGinley, 1992)

Within this framework, all written texts are seen as reflecting social and cultural contexts. All writers write as a reaction to texts from their experiences (both written and spoken) and anticipate reactions to their texts from others. Bakhtin argued that every utterance is formulated in response to what has been heard or experienced and in anticipation of the response of addressees. This constant response and anticipation nature of speech (spoken or written) is termed *dialogic*. It was from this perspective that participants' personally composed poems were analyzed. Students' written pieces were examined for evidence of responding to another utterance and evidence of anticipating another's response -- dialogic processes.

Students' response utterances were often in response to people present in the setting, but utterances were also formulated in response to literature that they read. Due to literature choices for this study, students had the opportunity to respond to utterances by authors of diverse backgrounds. When the voices of poets were incorporated into new pieces, the language was seen as appropriated. Therefore, students' responses were considered in light of shared literature and their own verbal responses and comments. After complete data analysis, students' ethnic backgrounds were considered and compared to poets' backgrounds noticing any patterns or possible relationships.

Methods

Qualitative research methods, specifically an embedded case-study design, were used for this research. One self-contained sixth-grade class with a diverse student population of 22 students was selected for the case-study whole group. Within that class, five case students were selected for specific focus. Two male and three female students

were purposively selected according to four criteria: (a) unique involvement in the classroom community, i.e. leader, independent of group, (b) not easily distracted and able to proceed after short interruptions, (c) reasonably fluent writers, (d) diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds. Cross-case analysis provided information pertaining to the whole group.

Poetry was carefully chosen according to selection criteria for multicultural literature published by the Racism and Sexism Resource Center for Education, a division of the Council on Interracial Books for Children (Barry, 1990). A theme of "Being and Becoming" was selected for the poems, which is appropriate for the state of change for most pre-adolescent children. A total of 55 poems were selected, typed, and copied to booklets for each student. Students kept the booklets at their desks and could write on them and refer to them whenever they chose.

Data were collected during a six-week language arts study of poetry and poetry writing. The classroom teacher led the class in the study of poetry and used the 55 selected poems from diverse authors as the immersion literature. A modified writing-workshop format was used, and the teacher conducted mini-lessons during the first part of class during approximately half of the sessions. During each language arts period (a) the teacher read poems aloud (students had individual copies of each), (b) students discussed what they noticed about the poetry in small groups and then the whole class, (c) students and teacher wrote poetry during a ten-minute sustained silent writing period, (d) students voluntarily read some of their written pieces to the entire class, and (e) students conferenced with teacher and peers for revision or editing purposes or wrote with free-choice options. At the end of the study period, students selected two or more of their poems to publish in a class poetry booklet.

Data Source and Analysis

Data consisted of information from five sources: (a) student-authored poetry, (b) selected published poetry, (c) field notes from observations, (d) student in-depth interviews, and (e) audio-tape recordings of some *ad hoc* student peer conference groups. Documents and interview data were collected from all students who were involved in the study. Observations during teacher-directed time focused on student responses and interactions with the teacher. Further observations focused specifically on the five case students during conferencing and free-writing times. Data from the remaining seventeen class members provided additional examples that helped support or question theoretical propositions. Case students' cultural/ethnic backgrounds included African-American, European-American with no student-named specific heritage, Irish-American, Jewish, and Nigerian-Muslim.

Bakhtin (1986) described an utterance as a unit of speech communication that is bound with an absolute beginning and an absolute end. In written text, an utterance may be as long as a novel. Using Bakhtin's definition of utterance, each poem was considered an utterance and considered first as a whole response. Each data source was further segmented into meaningful units and compared for patterns of language appropriation. According to Lincoln and Guba (1985), a unit must be understandable by itself without any additional information other than the broad context of the inquiry.

Lincoln and Guba's constant comparative method was used to examine the data for language appropriation and patterns of appropriation. Poetry pieces were compared at three levels: (a) the broad thematic level, (b) lines and phrases, and (c) unusual or distinctive vocabulary. Field note and interview data were used to note dates that students wrote poems, dates that published poetry was shared, students' explanations about their own pieces, circumstances and contexts of the workshop periods, and conversations about their writing and responses to poetry.

Results and implications

Students did appropriate language from the multicultural poetry selected for study. Students appropriated themes, phrases, and words from various poems into their own poetry. Most of the students who appropriated language from the selected multicultural poetry selected poetry cross-culturally/ethnically. Thus, European-American students appropriated language from African, African-American, Ugandan, English, etc. poets. Students from Africa responded by appropriating from European-American, African-American, and Mexican-American poets. One African-American student did seem to show a preference for poetry by African-American poets. Patterns of appropriation indicate that students responded to poems that held some type of personal attraction or meaning to them. Thus, students used language appropriated from any author whose works appealed to them in some way, and incorporated into their own utterances.

Katrina's, a European-American girl from a middle-class family, poem "Basketball and brothers don't Mix!" best exemplifies application of Bakhtin's theory to the data in this study. Katrina often wrote about her brothers and sports, important people and events in her life. Her favorite personally composed poem was one she named "Brothers and basketball Don't Mix!" In her interview, Katrina shared that the poem "basketball" by African-American poet Nikki Giovanni was the impetus for her own poem. Katrina had shared about her own poem, and I asked, "Did that poem we read in class..." Katrina immediately responded with, "Yeah, that definitely started it because that kid was going in there saying ... your nose is runnin' and I sort of wanted it to be like that when I mentioned change and how they always, I say pass

over here, oh, get your own rebound, because I think that's umm, is called, I think that was one that's just called basketball by Nikki Giovanni." Giovanni's and Katrina's poems follow:

basketball by Nikki Giovanni

1- when spanky goes
2- to the playground all the big boys say
3- hey big time--what's happenin'
4- 'cause his big brother plays basketball for their high school
5- and he gives them the power sign and says
6- you got it
7- but when i go and say
8- what's the word
9- they just say
10- your nose is running junior
11- one day i'll be seven feet tall
12- even if i never get a big brother
13- and i'll stuff that sweaty ball down
14- their laughing throats

Brothers and basketball Don't Mix! by Katrina

1- When I play
2- basketball with my
3- great big brother
4- he always shoots
5- a outside shot. And
6- if he makes it he'll
7- say "give me some
8- change." But when I
9- make a outside shot
10- and ask for some "change"
11- he'll say you weren't
12- behind the line.
13- and when I say
14- pass over here he'll
15- say get your own
16- re-bound. So when
17- I'm just about to
18- get the ball he stand
19- over me and with
20- his hand he tips the
21- ball away.

Katrina's attitude about basketball seems very much like Giovanni's. Both lament the dominance of an older brother. Line four of Giovanni's poem, "'cause his big brother plays basketball for their high school," is closely paralleled in Katrina's lines one through three, "When I play basketball with my great big brother." Another similarity between the two pieces comes in lines five through twelve of Katrina's poem and Giovanni's lines five through ten. Giovanni wrote, "and he gives them the power sign and says you got it but when i go and say what's the word they just say your nose is running junior." The similarity between a power sign and "giving change" are clear with Katrina's words, "And if he makes it he'll say 'give me

some change.' But when I make a outside shot and ask for some 'change' he'll say you weren't behind the line." Katrina's process of formulating her utterance was clear; she told about it during the interview. First, Katrina actively responded with agreement to the utterance of Giovanni and formulated her own response from her own stance in the world -- a younger sister playing basketball with her big brother.

Katrina's utterance was also formulated in anticipation of response from members of the class. Replying to the interview question about sharing poems with the whole class, Katrina said, "I know when I said 'Brothers and Basketball,' people laughed and that's sorta what I wanted, too. Because this was a poem that was supposed to make you laugh or think, gee, what did, I guess I, I feel sorry for that girl. She has to play basketball with her great big brother, and he's so mean." Katrina's comments give us that rare chance to almost see inside her head as she composed her utterance.

Katrina's ideas align well with Bakhtin's suggestions that each utterance is filled with *dialogic overtones*. Bakhtin (1986) wrote, "The expression of an utterance always *responds* to a greater or lesser degree, that is, it expresses the speaker's attitude toward others' utterances and not just his (sic) attitude toward the object of his (sic) utterance" (p. 92, emphasis in original). Bakhtin also wrote, "When constructing my utterance, I try to act in accordance with the response I anticipate, so this anticipated response, in turn exerts an active influence on my utterance" (p. 95). Katrina said almost exactly the same thing. It seems Katrina's awareness of "otherness" and "own-ness" were fairly high for this piece. She recognized the social context of Giovanni's utterance and the similarity to her own. Katrina further expressed awareness of social context, class community, in which her utterance would be received. Her shared language territory link with Bakhtin's suggestion of varying awareness and detachment.

Chatrina, an African-American student from low socioeconomic circumstances also wrote in response to Giovanni's poem "basketball." During whole class discussion about the poem, Chatrina said the big guys were showing off in the poem. When Chatrina wrote that day, she chose "basketball" as her theme. Chatrina wrote:

Basketball by Chatrina

1- basketball is a fun sport
2- but when it gets physical
3- it gets physical
4- there's killings and everything
5- there is a way you can solve it
6- get out of that kind (of) situation

The pattern Chatrina seemed to be developing was one in which she chose a poem that connected to her life in some way, used the title for her own poem, and then wrote from her

own experience. A similar pattern can be seen in connection with the physical nature of playground basketball. Giovanni's lines 13 and 14 are physical by implication when she wrote, "and i'll stuff that sweaty ball down their laughing throats." Chatrina wrote in lines two and three, "but when it gets physical, it gets physical," which seemed to be Chatrina's way of talking about similar basketball-associated experiences. Another pattern that is similar between Chatrina's and Giovanni's poems is the lack of capital letters. Although Chatrina was not always consistent in her use of upper and lower-case letters in her poetry, she did usually include them. In "Basketball" she only used a capital letter in the title. But only Chatrina's first line "basketball is a fun sport" seems to agree with Giovanni's celebration of basketball. After that, Chatrina presented a very different picture of basketball, that of danger and violence. And rather than continue playing while growing up, Chatrina advised to "get out of that kind (of) situation." Based on the teacher's description of family concerns about Chatrina's brother, it seems possible that Chatrina was anticipating her brother as the respondent to her utterance about basketball.

One of the favorite poems of several students was "Bad Morning" by Langston Hughes, famous African-American poet. The poem is short and shows a sense of humor. Chatrina was one who truly enjoyed "Bad Morning." Following is the text of Hughes' poem:

Bad Morning by Langston Hughes

1- Here I sit
2- With my shoes mismated.
3- Lawdy-mercy!
4- I's frustrated!

While students discussed the poetry of the day, I stopped by Chatrina and her partner's desk and asked which poem they liked best. Chatrina answered that "Bad Morning" was definitely their favorite. When asked why she liked it, Chatrina said she thought he (the poet) had had a bad start to his day, and she liked the way it said it. During sustained silent writing that morning, Chatrina wrote the following poem that she read to the whole class:

bad Morning by Chatrina

1- I woke up on the
2- wrong side of the floor this morning.
3- Waking up about to get in the shower
4- and couldn't see (a)while and finally
5- I opened my eyes and my brother
6- was just staring right at me.

After Chatrina read this poem aloud, she explained that she'd written her poem because she'd had to sleep with her brothers the night before and she was on the floor. Again Chatrina appropriated the title for her own. With "bad Morning" that seemed to be all

Chatrina needed to move her to her own experiences. Chatrina agreed with Hughes' mood of frustration and conveyed her world-view by including her brother and her frustration with him in her poem.

The second time that students chose the poems to read in class, Chatrina chose Langston Hughes' poem, "Mother to Son." When the teacher was ready to read "Mother to Son," she asked Chatrina if she had any reason for choosing that poem. Chatrina replied, "I like it. I think she is telling about life and she's telling it like it is." During sustained silent reading Chatrina brought the poem she had just written for me to read. She said it was a little like the "Mother to Son" poem. Her poem is titled "Keep movin on." The entire text of both poems follows:

Mother to Son by Langston Hughes

1- Well, son, I'll tell you:
2- Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
3- It's had tacks in it,
4- And splinters,
5- And boards torn up,
6- And places with no carpet on the floor--
7- Bare.
8- But all the time
9- I'se been a-climbin' on,
10- And reachin' landin's,
11- And turnin' corners,
12- And sometimes goin' in the dark
13- Where there ain't been no light.
14- So boy, don't you turn back.
15- Don't you set down on the steps
16- 'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
17- Don't you fall now--
18- For I'se still goin', honey,
19- I'se still climbin',
20- And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.

Keep movin' on by Chatrina

1- Keep movin' on don't stop
2- My Mom always tells
3- Me to keep my head
4- Up and keep going Never (stop)
5- and I always keep my
6- head up

Chatrina verbally added the word *stop* in line four when she read the poem to me during her interview. During that interview, Chatrina shared about several of her poems. She remembered, "And I wrote one about my mom about, because I had just got through reading the one for me, the one about 'life for me ain't been no crystal stair.' I read that and I had

wrote one because my mom had, she always tells me to keep my head up, and I had wrote about that but I can't find it." We did find the poem in her folder, and Chatrina read it aloud. When asked what she liked about "Crystal Stair," Chatrina explained what the poem meant to her. One comment is especially pertinent to Chatrina's own composition, "...and she tells him, I think she was trying to tell him to keep his head up."

Chatrina obviously used "Mother to Son" as an inspiration for her own writing, but there are some ideas that specifically come through. Hughes explains who is talking to whom in his first line, "Well, son, I'll tell you." Chatrina, in line two, portrays that information with "My Mom always tells Me." In line one Chatrina wrote "Keep movin' on don't stop" which correlates with Hughes' lines fourteen and fifteen, "So boy, don't you turn back. Don't you set down on the steps." Chatrina's words "keep movin'" parallel Hughes' line eighteen "I'se still goin'" and line nineteen "I'se still climbin.'" While Hughes used the words "don't you turn back," Chatrina conveyed the same message with "keep going." Chatrina's response seems to exemplify nearly complete agreement with the utterance that preceded her own.

Deborah described herself as shy and did not talk a lot in whole-group settings. She did, however, talk readily to friends an teachers about gender equity and her Jewish faith. Deborah's grandparents came to the United States from Russia. Deborah wrote many poems and appropriated ideas and words from many sources, seemingly predominately text sources. Parts of Deborah's poem "Deepest Darkest Night" appear to be drawn from English youth author Patricia Taylor's "Fear When Coming Home Through a Dark Country Lane." Deborah's handwriting on the piece was sprawled and not always on the lines, uncharacteristic for Deborah, which might imply that she wrote this poem quickly. Following is the complete text of each poem:

Fear When Coming Home Through a Dark Country Lane
by Patricia Taylor

1- On dark nights on lone country lanes
2- Why do you pester me so?
3- Why do you make me go
4- Creeping and crawling along
5- When the wind rustles in the trees,
6- Or when the owl hoots his nightly song?
7- Why, when mice scuttle as they please
8- Across the beaten track,
9- Do you make me stop or look back?
10- Oh! heartless thing, have you no feeling for me?
11- I wonder, I wonder,
12- Is it your nature so to be?
13- Is it your nature?

Deepest Darkest Night by Deborah

1- On the deepest, darkest night

2- I creep along the cloudy street
3- hearing voices that are not there
4- seeing things in the air
5- I run along on the street
6- run along with quiet feet
7- In my house I go bolting the door
8- Then out my breath goes
9- as I sink to the floor
10- now in the dark I creep
11- going towards my bed
12- In the silence they become one
13- pillow and head

Deborah has appropriated theme and words from the published poem. Both poems deal with being out on a dark night. Deborah does not directly mention fear as Taylor does, but the message is there through "hearing voices that are not there," "bolting the door," and "out my breath goes." In line one Deborah wrote "On the deepest, darkest night" which parallels Taylor's first line "On dark nights." Further evidence of Deborah's appropriation is through her use of the word *creep* twice. Deborah wrote, "I creep along" in her second line, which is much like the fourth line "Creeping and crawling along" in Taylor's poem. Deborah used *creep* again in her tenth line with "now in the dark I creep." The similarities between these two pieces are apparent, and Deborah's response seems to be one of agreement with the utterance of Taylor. Consistent with Bakhtin's theory, Deborah brought her own voice into her poem by setting the poem's character on a street rather than country lanes and ended by going in "my" house and going to bed. Deborah seems to bring more closure to the utterance by reaching bed and rest while Taylor ends with wondering about fear. Since Deborah almost never read her poetry aloud to the whole class, her anticipated audience was probably only friends in close proximity and possibly teacher and researcher. It seems possible that Deborah would anticipate that friends who live in town would identify with fear when on streets and seeing and hearing things.

Educational importance

As the student population in the United States becomes more diverse, educators have the opportunity and obligation to adopt materials and instructional methods that provide all students the opportunity to experience the rich diversity our country and easily-accessible world afford them. James Banks (1993), leader in multicultural education, urges educators to expand the educational canon to include perspectives of people from diverse backgrounds. Au (1993) suggested that one way for teachers to adopt multicultural approaches to education is through use of multiethnic literature because it affirms and validates backgrounds of all students, and it provides a way for students to develop

tolerance and/or appreciation for people of diverse backgrounds. Literacy teachers are especially vital in this process.

Bakhtin's perspectives on language appropriation and dialogic responses provides educators with new ways to look at their literature selections and their students' written work in reading/writing workshops. Seeing texts as representing many voices transformed into a child's own voice in writing, researchers who study children's texts can provide insight into children's involvement in culture and community. Students who connect their own context with authors of diverse cultural/ethnic backgrounds enjoy opportunities only available through literature that portrays pluralism, where many voices are available for response and appropriation.

As students in this research study spontaneously and naturally appropriated language from authors of diverse backgrounds into their own written works, they were involved with diversity. This research provided not only diverse poetry pieces but diverse author backgrounds as well, and students' responses demonstrated a broad range of interests and topics. Thus, children had the opportunity to respond to pieces that were meaningful for their unique circumstances. The results of this study support the inclusion of multicultural literature as a component of basic education, not only through students' responses to the poets' perspectives but also through academic growth. This corresponds to Nieto's (1992) call for multicultural education that is basic; thus, when choosing literature for a genre-study writing experience, teachers will routinely choose literature from multiple perspectives. "Such insights have important implications for language arts instruction in an ever-growing multicultural society" (Kamberelis & McGinley, 1992, p. 200). Recognizing the hopes of multicultural educators to incorporate more pluralistic approaches to teaching, this research is timely and pertinent.

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